



Work in full bloom at King County Elections prior to bond vote

April 20, 2011

By Sebastian Moraga

Election Day is almost a half-month away, but you would never know it by the serious faces inside King County Elections in Tukwila April 14.

With the fate of a new middle school hanging in the balance of the April 26 vote, the staff of King County Elections held a "Logic and Accuracy" test to ensure the equipment that will count and tabulate votes works well.

The test is every bit as serious as it sounds, and the looks on the faces of King County staffers reflected the gravity of the situation. These are the machines that will check, recognize and tabulate votes.

Tests include a Zero Report, which runs ballots through the system to ensure no ballots have been counted before.

"It shows that it's ready for starting the real ballots next," Laird Hail, King County Elections' technical services manager, said.

The computers have sealed CD drives, the tabulating machines stand behind chain-link fences, and employees can only access the latter through fingerprint identification and smart I.D. cards that identify workers' login rights.

"The system administrator goes through and sets up all the users and what they can do," Hail said, meaning what software they can access.

The cards come loaded with passwords, so if a staffer loses one, there's no danger since that password is useless to everyone else.

Entrance to the building itself also requires a fingerprint I.D., called a biometric I.D. Starting the tabulation requires another card, which will remain sealed away until Election Night.

That way, ballots can be counted, but no one will know the result until Election Night. Since the April 26 ballot only has two measures in it, none countywide, only a few of the machines will be used.

In 2012, when the nation picks its next president, 900,000 ballots will come in and every machine will be in use, Hail said.

Larger elections, such as November 2012, will require temporary personnel, Hail said. This month's vote will require only staff.

When counting and tabulating, it's not all machines. Teams of two people review votes the machines struggle with, like ballots with stray marks or when people vote with checkmarks, administrative specialist Bill Weaver said.

"We have a manual called 'The Voter Intent Manual' that our people follow," Hail said. "So if they did a check mark on all of them, we presume that the intent was for that to be a vote."

Elections vary from state to state, King County Elections' communications specialist Katie Streit said. Some states certify within 48 hours after Election Day. Washington waits for 15 days before certifying an election. That allows for more ballots to come in and be counted, as well as for more time to decide on disputed ballots.

All the hubbub takes place in a building that's a temporary home for King County Elections, while the regular headquarters in Renton gets remodeled. Hence things like the chain-link fence.

"It was the cheapest, quickest way to be able to do it," Hail said, "and maintain the visibility."

Visibility matters. All of the computer wires hang in plain sight so people can trace them and corroborate that nothing comes from outside the room. The staff's goal is not the perception of fairness — proof is, Hail said.

"We want to ensure that the equipment and the software are functioning properly," Hail said, "and that the ballots are tabulated accurately and give results that reflect the will of the people."